THE INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS OF THE PRAGUE SPRING

THE DEVELOPMENT OF REFORMIST IDEAS IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA 1956–1967

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INTRODUCTION

Incongruence between Communism and Czech national disposition has a history which reveals long and genuine striving for socialism *as a socially just form of democracy* in conflict with Communism *as a system of autocratic organization and, eventually, government.*

Like many of its European counterparts, the Czechoslovak Communist Party sprang out of a social democratic womb in the tumultuous revolutionary wave after the First World War. Unlike many of its counterparts, it was born a resilient child. Czechoslovak Communism from 1918 to 1921 did not mainly consist of feeble extremist groups of eccentrics or daydreamers who had decided to opt out from the war-afflicted society or who were chucked out as illegitimates by sensible politicians. The Party was the outcome of a split in the Social Democratic Party and the crack went right down the middle. At the time of its inception in 1921, the Czechoslovak Communist Party boasted 350,000 members. For a population of 13 million, this was more than a respectable number – some 4 per cent of the adult population. In the first parliamentary election which the Party contested, in 1925, it polled a hefty 13.2 per cent of the popular vote, was returned in 41 constituencies out of 300, and became the second largest Party in the country, second only by five seats to the Agrarians.

At the same time, it was not a Party of disillusioned intellectuals or uneducated peasantry and soldiery, but a solidly working-class and predominantly urban organization. The country in which it operated had almost one-half of its population engaged in industry and 35 per cent residing in townships in 1921. It used to be the workshop of Austria and it was aspiring to become an industrially advanced and socially equitable independent state in Central Europe, conscientiously oriented towards technical progress.

Right from the beginning, the numerical strength of the Party and the national and democratic traditions of the country clashed with the rigid revolutionary demands imposed on the working-class

movement by the Third Internationale. To have a large membership meant to avoid adventurous scheming and unpremeditated action. To operate among the Czechoslovak nation meant to take the Czechoslovak traditions into account. It took the leaders of the newly emergent Czechoslovak Communist Party a full year – from September 1920 to October 1921 before they reluctantly accepted the stiff conditions of membership stipulated by Lenin and Zinovev for those wishing to join the Communist Internationale.

Even then the elements of Czechoslovak nationalism and democratism did not die out. To outweigh their effect on the Party's behaviour, the Communist Internationale – now under Stalin more than under anybody else – gave its blessing in 1929 to a young and well-disciplined man, a professional revolutionary more than a politician, Klement Gottwald. He was not impressed by the economic and political progress of his country in the 1920s and was in fact lucky to see his own star rising on the eve of that ugly period of inter-war civilization – the economic depression. Under him, the Czechoslovak Communist Party might have degenerated into a sectarian handful if it had not been for the change from boom to crisis. 'Yes', he told a startled parliament in his maiden speech in 1929, 'we do travel to Moscow for tuition, and you know what they teach us? They teach us how to twist your necks!'

Gottwald's marriage with the Third Internationale may have been what the matchmakers were after, but it boded badly for the possible love affair between Communism and Czechoslovak democratism. The Communist Party membership, already dwindling before, declined from 138,000 in 1927 to a meagre 40,000 in 1931. By all indications, the Czechoslovaks were not eager to embrace the doctrine although the Communist vote in parliamentary elections remained always high. This was due more to passive dissatisfaction with various social evils, by no means insignificant, than to active advocacy of the gospel by the voters.

The other event, apart from economic depression, which gave Gottwald a chance was the rise of Fascism in Germany and the direct threat which it immediately posed to Czechoslovakia. Opposition to Hitler (or 'Defence of the Republic' as it became known) was demonstrably a cause that did not go against the grain of the

Czechoslovak national disposition. Since the men who were running the country had to exercise a certain amount of caution in face of their strong neighbour while some were even not unfriendly to him, Gottwald was left to champion the anti-Fascist cause and compete for public confidence with all vehemence. At long last, the Communist Internationale came to draw a belated lesson from the catastrophic policy of the German Communists and since its 7th Congress in 1935 the Social Democrats ceased to be attacked as the main enemies of the working class. The idea of a Popular Front as an *ad hoc* union between democrats and Communists against Nazism, gave the Czechoslovak Communist Party a new lease of life. Membership started to grow again, reaching some 70,000 in 1936 and 100,000 at the time of Munich in 1938. The conclusion of a Soviet–Czechoslovak Treaty in 1935 most certainly helped this development.

Then the Czechoslovak Communist Party went underground after Munich and when Gottwald and his fellows were repairing to Moscow, the Party's record seemed to be to everybody's liking: it stood for democratism in that it professed preference for the country's institutions to those of Nazism; it stood for cooperation with the other anti-Fascists, bourgeois or social democratic; and it stood for social justice which certainly represented a strong argument with both the working masses and the liberal intelligentsia. Moreover, it was not blemished by collaboration with Fascism as many conservative politicians were, or by pro-Western orientation which, at the time of Munich, put a cumbersome onus on many a genuine democrat.

But Moscow played a difficult card once again in the way of the Soviet–German Non-Aggression Pact of August 1939. This was a particularly unsavoury titbit for the Czechoslovak Communists to swallow, when their country was being occupied by Hitler and the patriots already dying before Nazi execution squads. But swallow it they did. It is not pleasant to read Communist documents of the time calling the war 'imperialist' and of no concern to true proletarians while Czechoslovak universities were being closed down by the Nazis and while persecution was taking its toll. Some students of the period have even suggested that cases of collaboration

between the Communists and the German Gestapo occurred. But credit should be given where it is due: the Communists eventually built up a clandestine anti-Fascist organization and, as soon as Hitler's cardinal error brought Germany into war with Russia, they rose to become an exceptionally active part of the resistance movement. Of the 100,000 members of the party, 60,000 were captured and sent to concentration camps where 25,000 died or were tortured to death.

As it should be, the headquarters of the Czechoslovak Communist Party during the war were in Moscow and Klement Gottwald was the leader. The base of the democratic government-in-exile under President Beneš was in London, where Gottwald also kept a small group of his followers. The wartime East–West alliance set the pattern for the relationship between Beneš and Gottwald. With the Czechoslovak nation's affection (if not general) for Beneš and with the active national and democratic disposition of the people, Gottwald could not hope to play the role of national leader alone. He could never have got away with it at that time. Equally, with Russia as a partner in the anti-Hitler coalition and with the influence of Communists obviously growing in the underground at home, Beneš realized that to go it alone, without Gottwald, would mean to invite disaster apart from being dishonest. Urged by circumstances, even if motivated differently, the two set out on a path of coexistence, cooperation and alliance. Beneš and Gottwald, the Democrat and the Communist. Both undoubtedly hoped to get the best out of this partnership. The trouble was that what was best for Beneš was not best for Gottwald and vice versa.

Sometime around the middle of the war, in 1943, the idea seemed logically to emerge against the background of the Beneš–Gottwald relationship of what was later to be called 'specific Czechoslovak road to socialism'. Dictated at first by necessity, as a tactical political phenomenon, it soon promised to evolve into a permanent arrangement for the country as soon as it was liberated.

Beneš was quite obviously very honest about it. He foresaw the role of Russia in post-war Europe and the place his country could hope for. Having the Communists in the government appeared to be not only necessary but also a safety valve against an overbearing

attitude of a strong post-war Russia. He believed that this Russia after Hitler would be much more democratic – and that the Czechoslovak Communists would be also. A few days before he died in 1948 he is reputed to have said 'My greatest mistake was that I refused to believe to the very last that even Stalin lied to me cynically both in 1935 and later, and that his assurances to me and to Masaryk were an intentional deceit.'[1]

But was it really so? Were Stalin and Gottwald agreed and determined to play a trick on Beneš when they invited him to come for talks to Moscow in December 1943? We may never know but one cannot help having the strong impression that this was not yet the case. The Yalta conference at which spheres of post-war influence were so unhappily bandied about was still more than a year ahead. Stalin must have been still primarily concerned with the war and the survival of his country's internal system. He had never quite abandoned his designs on Poland, and he was ready to press his henchmen with all harshness against the Polish Government in London. But with Czechoslovakia, he took great pains to emphasize (through Maisky and Fierlinger, the Czechoslovak envoy in Moscow) non-interference and readiness to accept Beneš' views. Gottwald, who had made unswerving loyalty to Stalin his lifelong profession, also acted with utmost restraint. He declined Beneš' offer for the Communists to join the London-based government because he did not want to prejudice the President's position in the Western world and he went out of his way to accommodate and even to moderate Beneš' proposals. Of course, Stalin and Gottwald treated Beneš in the way Communists treat bourgeois statesmen, i.e. not with full candour and, of course, they were speculating on increased Communist influence in post-war Czechoslovakia, but, on the strength of available evidence, it seems that a democratic semi-socialist Czechoslovakia, even if friendly to the Soviet Union, was all they were hoping for at that time. Another Finland, perhaps, we may say with the benefit of hindsight. One does not dare to think what would have happened if Beneš had been set on the idea of neutrality at that time. He might have even sold it to Stalin.

[1] Quoted by Korbel, *The Communist Subversion of Czechoslovakia* (Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 87.

What, then, made Stalin and Gottwald change their minds and when did they change them? When Beneš came to Moscow again with his full retinue on the way back to liberated Czechoslovakia, in March 1945, the plan for gradual ascent to full Communist power seemed to have been cooked up and put on the table for everybody to see (although Beneš still refused to believe his eyes). Three principal factors seemed to have been at play. Both Stalin and Gottwald were surprised by the scope of the concessions Beneš was willing to grant the Czechoslovak Communists. They would be foolish not to seize on them. Gottwald sent a message to Edvard Beneš after the 1943 talks expressing satisfaction with the outcome which 'even went beyond my expectation'. Secondly, the progress of war in 1944 must have assured Stalin of a superior future presence of Russia in Central Europe and face to face with the West which was willing to observe a demarcation line favourable to the Soviet Union, and thirdly, Gottwald may have supplied Stalin with the notion of a gradual Communist revolution coming about stage-by-stage by attrition. This was appropriate for the Czechoslovak situation whereas a direct imposition of Communism was not. (The idea was to be tried in France and Italy as well.)

So when the 1945 talks in Moscow got under way, it was Gottwald who called the tune. He could well afford to be deliberately slow about nationalization of industry. But he was very quick and sharp where commanding heights of power were involved – on the local level, in the armed forces and in the government. Thus the local National Committees emerged in liberated territories with sweeping powers and largely under Communist dominance. The army was to be modelled on Soviet lines, including political officers, and the key posts in the government fell to the Communists, such as the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Information, and the Ministry of Agriculture with its vast powers over the redistribution of lands confiscated from the Germans. All was set to ease the way to undivided Communist power.

This is, however, only one half of the picture. The other half is revealed when an answer is sought to the question of whether a certain part of Communist Party members (and of course non-Party people) considered a fusion between nationalism, democratism

and Communism genuinely possible. The answer is an unmistakable 'Yes'. What Gottwald and his leadership almost certainly pursued since 1944 as a game for power, a large part of the nation saw as the long overdue injection of an old deficient system with new meanings and guarantees, as a welcome emergence of a system which would be more equitable and foolproof against another Munich collapse. Stale and ostentatious jingoism was to be replaced by modern patriotism of work and action. Politicking and multi-party bickering was to give way to plebeian, yet just, democracy for the majority, without the old fuddy-duddies as well as without dictatorship and the soviets. Exploitation and hoarding of wealth at the expense of the toiler was to be replaced by gradual socialization of economy while the element of competition and small private enterprise would be maintained as natural human stimuli. It was not to be so, but one can never understand why the Communists commanded not only some 38 per cent of popular vote (and the Social Democrats another 17 per cent) in the 1946 election, but also the loyalty of large segments of the younger generation and some of the best brains in the country. To say that these voters and supporters of the 'Czechoslovak road to socialism' were privy to Gottwald's and Stalin's long-term plans is ridiculous. After all they voted in 1946 to make the Communist Party the strongest in the country but not to endorse its monopoly of power for all times to come. If such monopoly had been at issue in a democratic election, the result would certainly have been different. The Communist voters were victims just as much as the more provident, who saw the danger clearly. Only their frustration was more tragic, because it was accompanied by a sense of personal failure. What they deserve from history is understanding, not condemnation. Hundreds of thousands were convinced that the cause they had chosen to follow was worthier than the cause of the non-Communist politicians who would have altered little on pre-war arrangements.

Gottwald very cleverly formulated his policy as pursuance of a national and democratic revolution and its gradual transformation into a socialist revolution. This was to be accomplished through increased Communist influence in all walks of life. To satisfy public opinion, Gottwald and his colleagues more than once explicitly

stated that Czechoslovak socialism would not embrace the Soviet system of state. It is interesting to note that some of the more primitive elements in the Communist Party were not happy about Gottwald's gradualism. In the backlash, they prodded him to more radical steps 'now that the Communists are demonstrably the strongest party'. Responding to this pressure from his own diehards, Gottwald felt it necessary to assure them shortly before the 1946 election in a revealing statement:

> Even if what is unlikely to happen should happen, notably that we do not achieve a favourable election result . . . the working class, our party, the working people will still possess adequate means, weapons and ways to rectify a simple mechanical vote which might be swayed by reactionary elements and saboteurs. Even then we shall have sufficient power to enforce results favourable to the working class.[1]

The Communists continued their policy of pressure and containment which they had begun in 1944. 1947 turned out to be a crucial year. In January, Gottwald proclaimed at his Party's Central Committee meeting that in the next elections, to be held in 1948, the Communists would seek to poll more than 50 per cent of the popular vote. To be able to do so, the Slovak public especially would have to be brought to heel because there the Communists had polled only 30 per cent against the Democratic Party's 62 per cent in 1946. Since the Democratic Party, with its secessionist inclinations, was unpopular among the Czechs Gottwald could count on Czech public opinion remaining at least neutral if he intervened. But these were still only electoral designs. In April and in June, Gottwald several times expressed satisfaction about continuing cooperation with the non-Communist parties and about the country's economic stability. He was probably not yet fully committed to accelerated action outside the constitutional framework.

A series of three international events seemed to have had a great effect on Gottwald's 'gradualist' plans. The French and the Italian Communists were compelled to leave their countries' governments, which almost certainly must have been interpreted in the Kremlin

[1] Klement Gottwald, *Spisy XII* (SNPL, Prague, 1955), pp. 253–4.

as a point scored against Gottwald's gradualist theory. Early in July, Gottwald readily accepted Stalin's ruling overriding a previous decision of the Czechoslovak government to take part in discussions about the Marshall Plan, and in September secret talks between a number of European Communist Parties finally led to the setting up of the Cominform, an unmistakable sign of Stalin's displeasure with the idea of diversity hitherto tolerated to some extent in the Communist movement, and a return to rigid centralism.

Gottwald, the true follower of Stalin, immediately reacted to the changing wind with great sensitivity. At the end of August he spoke for the first time about 'reactionary agents' in the non-Communist parties and called on 'honest members of these parties to drive them out'. Rudolf Slánský, the Party's Secretary-General, was the Czechoslovak speaker at the inaugural session of the Cominform. He spoke in the same vein: progressive elements in the non-Communist parties would join the Communists, and reactionaries would be chucked out of the National Front. The plan had obviously been sealed. Gradualism would be speeded up to the point of rapid escalation and the main weapons to be applied would be a continuous barrage of accusations levelled at the democrats and unconstitutional pressure on them. Collaborators would be found in the non-Communist parties and their legitimate leaders would be forced out.

The pace of events became noticeably quicker from September 1947 on. There was no doubt that the Communists were on the offensive. Three non-Communist members of the cabinet received wooden boxes with explosives and one set of clues led to Communist functionaries, although the perpetrators were never publicly exposed. Suddenly an 'anti-state plot' was uncovered in Slovakia, implicating leading members of the Democratic Party and resulting in a reorganization of the Slovak Government (Board of Commissioners) under Dr Gustáv Husák. The Communist Party suggested that extra payments should be made to the farmers, and demanded that the necessary money be obtained by the taxation of 'millionaires'. Non-Communist officers in the police were being systematically removed from posts of importance. A proposal was made to have the so-called mass organizations, most of which were dominated by the Communists, represented in the National Front when

political decisions were made. Agents provocateurs were used to implicate non-Communist politicians in an alleged subversive conspiracy, and so on.

Public opinion at this time of growing hysteria is now difficult to gauge, but it seems that the Communists sensed some danger of the public recoiling from the practices which were not customary in a democratically functioning society. The congress of the Social Democratic Party in the middle of November voted for example to replace the pro-Communist leader Fierlinger by the middle-of-the-roader Laušman. But the Communists had a plan and a timetable to follow, their leadership was united in the pursuit of this plan, their party had always been known for disciplinary obedience and support from the Cominform could be counted on. The non-Communist parties had nothing of this kind.

At the Czechoslovak Communist Party Central Committee meeting at the end of November, Gottwald spoke almost hysterically about the plotting of local and foreign reactionaries in the democratic parties and called their activity 'anti-state'. This must be combated by both political and administrative means. The non-Communist parties must purge themselves of reactionary agents and subversive elements. The pattern of events to come was rapidly taking shape. The Cominform pressed Gottwald to act: by the beginning of 1948 Czechoslovakia was the last country in the Soviet orbit in which the ultimate issue of political power had still remained undecided.

It is not easy to find a satisfactory explanation for one particular puzzle: why did the enthusiasts, the supporters of the policy of national and democratic socialism, not see through this ultimate phase of the process which was destroying all their beliefs? Maybe that by that time the Party was already fully in the hands of its *apparatchiki*, there was no time to pause and think, to talk, debate, object or criticize. It all happened much too quickly. Action was the order of the day, discipline and obedience were demanded, and so the masses went on, mechanically, to fulfil the orders of those in whom they believed, inventing for themselves excuses and motivations which they would find so patently false not much later.

When the full crisis blew up on 13 February it was in connection with a relatively minor issue of eight police officers dismissed by the

Communist Minister of the Interior from commanding posts. The non-Communist majority in the Government voted to reverse the order which the Communists refused to do. Instead the Communist Party Politburo started a series of twice-daily meetings, with direct lines opened to the powerful Ministry of the Interior and the Soviet Embassy. On 17 February a state of emergency for all Communist Party members was proclaimed, messengers were dispatched to Party organizations in regions and districts to supervise action and the first steps were taken to organize the Workers' Militia as a Communist armed force. On 19 February the Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Zorin arrived in Prague without prior notice. On 20 February twelve non-Communist ministers resigned, leaving thirteen ministers (seven Communist, four Social Democrat, two non-partisan) and the Prime Minister, Gottwald, in a rump government. The intention was for Beneš, the President, to reject the resignation and to call the government to order, or, alternatively, to get the Social Democrats to resign as well, leaving the Communists in a minority with no option but a full government resignation and new elections. But what really followed was a series of blows dealt by the Communists to the democrats. The trouble was that while the non-Communists sought to handle the crisis in a traditional political manner, the response was highly unorthodox and thoroughly unconstitutional. In Slovakia, Dr Husák simply informed the Democrats in the Slovak National Council, who had not resigned, that they were dismissed from office because their Prague colleagues had resigned.

Hundreds of thousands were summoned into the streets to support the Communists and to demand that the resignations be accepted and a new Gottwald government formed. Of the 8,000 trade union delegates assembled in Prague on 22 February only ten were said to have denied the Communists their support. More than two million joined the token general strike on the 24th which the Communists had been originally planning as the final step in the pre-election campaign. The plan to destroy the non-Communist parties found reflection in the establishment of the so-called Action Committees designed to purge these parties and other institutions of anti-Communist office-holders. On 22 February the Workers'

Militia was constituted with a strength of 15,000 men, including 7,000 in Prague, and 10,000 rifles and 2,000 tommy guns were confiscated for it in a Brno Armament Factory. The 40,000-strong police force, long shaped to the requisite political contours by the Communist Minister of the Interior, gave almost unanimous backing to Klement Gottwald. Two emergency police regiments were moved into Prague and one to Bratislava. There was no state of siege, marshal law or curfew, but the police imposed an effective ban on rallies of the non-Communist parties and searched and seized their secretariats and printing offices. In Slovakia a force of former anti-Nazi guerilla fighters, still possessing their arms, was put on alert.

The army at that time had some 140,000 men under General Svoboda, now President, then a non-Party military leader. He threw his full weight behind the Communists. At a meeting of the Central Action Committee on 23 February, he declared that the army sided with the Communists: 'He who threatens the unity of the nation is dangerous and must be removed.' President Beneš was the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces and it is conceivable that he could have ordered them to act against the Communists or at least to call on loyal officers for help. Had he wanted to do so, he would have had to decide that a fight was necessary. But civil war was the thing he dreaded most. The Communists on the other hand felt no need to call on the army; their strength was formidable without it. Moreover, they could not be quite certain that presidential loyalty would not prove stronger than party loyalty. Thus they were content that the army should remain neutral.

The end was soon in sight. The country had no force comparable to the one the Communists were able to muster with such vigour and rapidity. To believe that Beneš could have reversed the flow single-handed, by refusing to accept the resignations of the non-Communist Ministers and by insisting on new elections, is naïve. He would have been swept away, although the Communists preferred him to stay for the moment. Not even the parliament, whose praesidium incidentally voted not to convoke a meeting in the middle of the crisis, could help. The Communists had seen to it that they were assured of a majority with the assistance of other parties' deputies who were willing to collaborate. On 25 February, after

4 p.m., Edvard Beneš accepted the resignations and signed appointments for new members of the government, hand-picked by Gottwald. Two days later, he left for his country residence and eight days later received Gottwald who assured him that the Communist Party would not stage any mass trials of its opponents. Beneš did not live to see that this assurance was yet another part of the promise that was not to come true. The country did.

The Czech and Slovak nations entered the second half of the 1950s exhausted by the nightmare of political trials and chained to a system of political processes which was intrinsically alien to them. In much too short a time – a mere seven years – the country had experienced a tidal wave of physical and mental strain usually associated only with periods of national emergency. Traditional institutions had been uprooted and traditional breathing space for political life re-apportioned. A comprehensive, tightly knit system of new political values had been brought in and hierarchically arranged, overreaching the boundaries of the political stage and extending to every corner of the citizens' private lives. The new political style required that identification of man with the established institutionalized system should be taken for granted. Those institutions which a short while ago had existed only in ideological models and rhetorical visions now presented themselves as real, divine, immutable, untouchable. Structure swallowed infrastructure and claimed unequivocal individual devotion. The traditions of Czechoslovak society, the spirit of its public institutions, the feelings and collective reason of its citizens, the operational modes of its leaders – all these had been, after February 1948, deliberately and forcefully ploughed up and sown with seeds which now produced a new system filling up the vital horizons of the nation.

The Communist Party's monopoly of power, taken to its utmost limit in the field of institutions, became the key principle of the day. All the other organizations were assigned the role of transmission belts, levers and cogs in a machine. There was no independent political action outside the Communist Party. Inside the Party, the formation of hierarchies quite logically led to the concentration of power in groups placed at the head of the various levels of the

apparat, and ultimately, in a small group of men at the top who made themselves superior to the formally highest Party bodies – the Congress and the Central Committee.

Since May 1955 meetings of the Party Politburo had been presided over by First Secretary Antonín Novotný. The inmost committee of holders of supreme power included Karol Bacílek, the man who became Minister of National Security in January 1952 after his predecessor Ladislav Kopřiva had been removed at Stalin's recommendation. He was the man who had paid a call on the condemned Slánský and his group just one day before their executions to promise them life, who shortly after Slánský's death on the gallows submitted to the Politburo a blueprint for the liquidation of some sixty remaining 'plotters' in a series of seven more trials, and who, incidentally, publicly commended Antonín Novotný in December 1952 for having assisted in the 'unmasking' of Slánský. Seats on the Politburo were also held at that time by Rudolf Barák, a newcomer from South Moravia, whose personal aspiration to power was later to be rewarded by the honour of being put under arrest by Antonín Novotný himself and by a jail sentence of fifteen years; Alexej Čepička, Klement Gottwald's son-in-law, the man of iron strength and inflated gestures with which he commanded the armed forces, who had been chosen to report to Stalin on 23 July 1951 about accusations against Slánský; Jaromír Dolanský who survived a Politburo membership spell lasting from September 1945 to April 1968; Zdeněk Fierlinger, the pre-war ambassador in Moscow and head of that group of Social Democrats who agreed to merge with the Communists in June 1948; Václav Kopecký who rewrote at the last minute the indictment against Slánský's group because even to the Politburo it seemed feeble, without knowing the investigation protocols in any detail; Viliam Široký a member of all the innermost power groups in the Party, the ruler of Slovakia and the chief liquidator of 'bourgeois nationalism'; and Antonín Zápotocký, Klement Gottwald's successor on the presidential throne, a veteran working-class functionary who succumbed in the last years of his life to the atmosphere of closed-door practices and arbitrariness.

The omnipotence of the Communist Party and its key committees relied on a centralized network of Party apparatuses, commanding

blind discipline from Communists wherever they might be at work and eliciting unchallenging obedience from citizens without Party affiliation. The harshness of the system was further multiplied by self-assertive tendencies in the police apparatus which led, especially after the arrival of Soviet advisers, to the formation of a considerable autonomous field of activity which remained not only outside the due control of the judiciary, the parliament and the government, but eventually even outside Party supervision. The only link which did exist between the Party and the political police took the form of ideological unity of purpose and a personal union between a handful of Party functionaries and the top people in the police.

The promising post-war experiment with 'socialism accomplished in a specifically Czechoslovak way' had been forgotten. The entire political structure and infrastructure was geared to follow the Soviet pattern. After the leaders willing to tread along this road had complied through a series of political trials and hangings with the double task of opening their own veins and of scaring their subordinates to death, the door to the final remodelling of Czechoslovakia was seemingly ajar.

Nevertheless, what appeared as an auspicious breeding ground for Stalin-type Communism without Stalin was in fact the background to yet another phase of the development into which the country had been pushed in the second half of 1947 and the Czechoslovak Communist Party back in 1929. The first jolt was to come from outside in the form of Khrushchev's demolition of the Stalin cult. Another factor, far less conspicuous but possibly more important in the long run, was of domestic provenance. It can be defined as a combination of the critical and creative potential inherent in the Czech and Slovak intelligentsia with the high degree of resilience in the Czech and Slovak nations.

The political leaders of the day may have felt that, while destroying political structures, they had equally swiftly disposed of the previous elements of political life, which are varyingly defined as traditions, atmosphere, national character, modal personality or public attitude. In fact, they fell victim to the fallacy, so typical of them, of wishful thinking, of regarding reports from subordinate functionaries as true depictions of life, of viewing things and persons through the eyes of